

1. James' story

Introduction - Before listening to this story please press 'pause' and read. Mark 10 verses 35-45 then the story will last a little over 10 minutes and will be followed by a short reflection and a prayer.

Dad didn't want us to leave. We were good fishermen, when we weren't arguing or messing about that is! The family business was doing well, we even made enough to hire others to work for us. I liked having people work for us, as a son of the boss I quite enjoyed giving instructions to men older than me.

We knew Jesus a little, Galilee is a small place. His father had fixed a mast on one of our boats that had broken in a storm and I think he also made some of our furniture. Jesus had a reputation for being a good man. He went to the synagogue regularly but unlike others who did that he wasn't pious and self-righteous, he was just good company and popular.

It was a surprise when he came down to the lake one day and asked me and John if we would like to travel with him. Zebedee, our father, looked on disapprovingly and, to be honest, that might have been one of the reasons we said we would go with Jesus. We were still young enough to relish doing exactly what our father didn't want us to do. To be fair, I issued some instructions to the hired men and told them to look after the business, and our father. I said that we would be back soon, and we set off, not knowing quite why we had agreed to go with him wherever it was he was going.

Travelling with Jesus was interesting, tiring and uncomfortable. As fishermen we were used to a certain routine – we rose early to fish, we sold what we had caught for the best price we could get and then we would clean the boat and mend the nets. When that was done there was only usually time to eat a good meal and then go to bed to be up before dawn to do the whole thing again. With Jesus there was no routine, we went where he went, we ate with him, when someone fed us, and when someone gave us a place to sleep we had a roof over our heads, but more often than not we slept under the stars. Sometimes Jesus would talk with people late into the night and we usually had to ask him what he had been talking about because we didn't understand much of what he said. Many is the time I have slept under a hedge with an empty stomach, my mind wrestling with stories that didn't seem to make any sense. On these

occasions I was often tempted to sneak away and go back to Galilee, my father and the hard but slightly more comfortable and predictable life of a fisherman.

So why didn't I leave? I didn't leave because every now and then something remarkable would happen – when Jesus was around people were changed – lepers and lunatics, the deaf and the blind, the sick and the lame were healed. Rich tax collectors gave their money away, the religious elite were challenged and embarrassed and untouchables were embraced. Jesus had real authority, many people looked up to him. It was true that some people hated him, others feared him but there were plenty of people who admired him and some, like me, began to wonder if he might be the Messiah

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Just before dawn one morning my brother, John, woke me. For a moment I thought I was back in Galilee, getting up to go fishing, but John soon explained that Jesus wanted us to go with him and Peter to a nearby mountain, just the four of us. As we began to climb in the chill morning none of us asked Jesus why we were climbing. I wondered if we were going to a rich man's house, built on the lower cool slopes, to beg for food. As we climbed higher I wondered if we were going to a commune of lepers to pray with them. Eventually we reached the top, having seen nobody. We sat in the shade of a tree, tired, hot and hungry and Jesus walked on a little, towards the sun that was now quite high in the sky. At first I thought the sun was right behind him because he seemed to start glowing, and then I thought I must have fallen asleep and was dreaming because in the midst of the brightness he seemed to be talking to two other men. Then I realised the sun was above him and that I was definitely awake and he was still glowing bright, talking to the mysterious visitors who looked like I imagined the old prophets might look. Slowly it dawned on me that we were in the midst of something extraordinary – time seemed to have stopped and earth and heaven were connected. We weren't afraid, we were simply overcome with the stillness, beauty and simplicity of what was happening – Jesus talking with two wise old friends, bathed in glorious light. It was as if God was telling us that Jesus was the one, Jesus was his son and then a cloud came and it was over. As usual he didn't explain what had happened and, annoyingly, he told us we couldn't tell anyone what we had seen – that was frustrating, but we did as we were told.



I couldn't forget that experience and sometimes John and I would find a quiet place to talk and muse about what had happened. We did not understand, we just knew that he had chosen only the two of us and Peter to go up the mountain with him so we concluded we must be special in some way. With that thought we approached him quietly one day and asked him if we could sit either side of him when he came into glory. We expected him to smile and embrace us and say *'of course boys, you will sit either side of me at the high table'*. But, when we asked him his face fell, sighing deeply he asked us if we could really live the way he lived and then he started talking about important people being servants and top people being slaves. He'd done it again, surprised and confused us.

It was a few months later that we began to understand what he said then and we began to realise quite how foolish we had been.

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It was just before Passover and we had all shared a meal. As usual we were all confused and for some reason we were anxious. Not only had he said strange prayers we didn't recognise over bread and wine, he had also washed our feet. The embarrassment was excruciating. Servants washed feet and in really big houses the servants of the servants washed feet. It made no sense that the one we followed, the one we called Rabbi, the one I had seen glow on the mountain, would wash our feet, but he had insisted. After the meal we went to Gethsemane, something we had done many times before. Sitting beneath ancient olive trees we began to talk quietly about what had just happened and the things he had said, but with the food, the wine and our general exhaustion we soon became sleepy and many of us began to doze. The next few hours passed in a nightmare blur – there were soldiers and swords, there was fear and confusion, there was darkness and evil. To our shame, we ran away. We should have tried to protect and save but we didn't. Instinctively we did what we could to protect and save ourselves.

So here I am, standing among some trees, a safe distance away but near enough to see him. And there he is, my friend, my teacher, my inspiration, possibly even the Messiah. He is lifted up high as he should be, but the agonising truth is that he is lifted up high because he is nailed to a cross. He should be on a throne dressed in white robes, surrounded by angels. He should have his friends next to him. He should have me and John by his side, one on his right and the other on his left. But there he is, naked, covered in blood and



sweat hanging in agony on a cross with nameless convicts hanging on crosses either side of him, one on his right and the other on his left.

His words of a few months before came back to haunt me *'Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?'* as I cowered in fear, watching his life slip away, I shuddered at the memory of the way we confidently and mistakenly said, *'Yes'*!

I slumped to the ground and sat in silence. The questions that had assailed me throughout my friendship with Jesus began to swirl and crash in my head. Had my father, Zebedee, been right to disapprove of us following him? Had all this been a tragic waste of time? Was he a hero or a deluded fool? Surely our

saviour should sit on a throne in glory, not hang on a cross in shame? Could the Messiah be nailed to a cross by worldly power?

Something wasn't right. I ignored the questions that were drowning me and thought only of him. I thought of all those lives he had changed, all that healing, all that forgiveness, all those untouchables embraced, and all done so quietly. When he did remarkable things he often instructed us not to tell anyone. Almost everything he did, he did quietly, gently, without fuss. The hammer of brutal human power had nailed him to a cross on a hill for all to see. His quiet, gentle power worked in the intimacy of human friendship and touch. Worldly power protected itself with a hammer in a fist. His gentle power was not protected at all – he was vulnerable and I realised that I had seen that vulnerability, but not thought about it, each and every day; when he was hungry and tired, when he laughed and joked, when he was frustrated and angry, when he rejoiced and celebrated, when he was sad and weeping, when he was shouting his stories to large crowds and when he sat in silence, deep in something like prayer. As the sky darkened I realised that his glory was nothing to do with worldly power. Nothing to do with thrones and high tables. Nothing to do with a hierarchy of friends – it was all to do with love and love blossoms when we are vulnerable, vulnerable to deep and profound joy and vulnerable to deep and profound sorrow.

I stood and watched as my friend's limp and lifeless body was taken down from the only earthly throne he was ever going to have. I went in search of my brother John, and Peter and the others. My heart was broken, I was still full of fear, but somewhere, deep inside, love was stirring. I no longer wanted to sit next



to him in glory, somehow I simply wanted him to walk beside me into a future where nothing was certain except that I would drink from his cup and share in his baptism.

Short pause

Reflection & Prayer As James surveyed the wondrous cross perhaps he would have been ashamed of his past, unthinking ambition. As we reflect on this story we bring our ambitions to you. Maybe we need guidance and inspiration to use our energy, our experience, our gifts and our skills to God's glory rather than our own. We need seek only to be counted amongst God's faithful friends and followers as we live and proclaim the love we see as we survey the wondrous cross.

Prayer - Living God, father of light, hope of nations, friend of sinners, builder of the city that is to come; your love is made visible in Jesus Christ, you bring home the lost, restore the sinner, give dignity to the despised and subdue the arrogant. In the face of Christ crucified your light shines out, flooding lives with

goodness and truth, gathering into one a divided and broken humanity. You are the source of hope for all, fill us with your creativity and love that we may be faithful disciples working constantly for your kingdom where all are one in Christ. Amen.